

## New condos, retail will transform area, mayor says

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SURREY - The artist's drawings for Surrey's largest residential development depict a gleaming, low-rise building surrounded by manicured lawns, trees and moms pushing strollers or walking hand-in-hand with toddlers.

Near the site office at 108 Avenue and East Whalley Ring Road, a young couple sodden from the rain pushes a shopping cart loaded with garbage bags and household items. This muddy lot will be home to the first phase of a sprawling agglomeration of 1,100 condos and streetfront shopping, the biggest mixed development in Surrey's history.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun

A 10-acre 1,100-unit development, shown in an artist's drawing for the Quattro project, will be built on property near 108th Avenue and King George Highway.

Quattro is two blocks from the Gateway SkyTrain station and a 45-minute commute from Vancouver. It is one block from a neighbourhood teeming with crack smokers and methamphetamine addicts, an emergency shelter, food bank and a dozen boarded-up businesses surrounded by razor wire.

East of King George Highway, 108 Avenue is as rough as it gets. At the Shell gas station a young man picks up a garbage can and tries to smash the window. A young woman with rotting teeth asks every customer for a cigarette. A group gathered near the edge of the lot are angry and menacing.

To entice developers into the area, the City of Surrey has reduced development cost charges by about 60 per cent on construction in Whalley. The Tien Sher Group building Quattro can expect to save several million dollars in fees, according to Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts.

"We adopted the policy about four years ago to trigger investment in the area," Watts said. "And it's working"

The neighbourhood east of King George Highway is a mix of older housing,

much of it boarded up and covered with graffiti. Tien Sher's lot on 108 Avenue and East Whalley Ring Road was assembled from derelict homes. Across the street is a video store and the area's most viable-looking business, the beer and wine store. The large strip mall just around the corner on King George Highway is anchored by Dollar Giant and Value Village. On the streetfront of the highway to the north are a tattoo parlour and a pawn shop.

On the west side of the highway, a cluster of shops is surrounded by high metal fencing. A small group of people smoke crack in the lane beside an abandoned commercial building on 135A Street. A sting operation in the area last week by Surrey RCMP resulted in 70 charges for drug offences.

Watts calls North Whalley "an area in transformation."

Now-shabby houses built in the 1940s are mixed with light industrial properties, not a mix that attracts families.

"It's very similar to what occurred down in False Creek and in Yaletown; it was all industrial, it was old houses," Watts explained. "So, you go in and you start transforming the area."

The first phase of Quattro is a four-storey condominium development containing a mix of 140 studio, one-bedroom, two-bedroom and two-bedroom-plus-den units, ranging up to 1,248 square feet. Completion is slated for fall of 2008. A second similar building is planned for completion in a year later. Units start at \$119,000 and about 60 per cent of the units are priced under \$250,000.

The final phases will consist of four high-rise buildings and two to three storeys of commercial space on the site of what is now the Flamingo Hotel. Total cost: \$600 million.

"The city loves what we are doing, because this will really bring people back to the street," said Bill Morrison, a partner with Pilot House, the marketing and sales company for Quattro. "It's huge. This is like a city within the city."

Several thousand people will move into the neighbourhood and that will attract new businesses.

"We are really going to change the whole area," Morrison said.

Barb Harris, an outreach and social service worker at the Gateway emergency shelter, was more skeptical. Harris helps run the 36-bed homeless shelter that serves Whalley.

"I don't think it's going to have much impact," Harris said. "It's been the same down here for a long time and SkyTrain has made things even worse."

The Gateway shelter attracts and feeds between 100 and 150 people a day. "135A is their domain," said Harris. "I'm more worried about the people who will buy those condos."

But Watts is determined to clean up that gritty corner of the city even if it means moving social service agencies to other neighbourhoods.

"One of the things that we have been striving for in recent years is to disperse the social services throughout the city," Watts said. "There's no reason why one area should be home to every single social service in the city."

SFU's Surrey Centre campus, a stone's throw from Whalley, is expected to grow to about 10,000 students, further changing the demographic of the area, she predicted.

"So there will be a lot of demand for smaller units for students and young professionals," Watts said.

The development fee reduction program aimed at attracting builders to Whalley was implemented in 2003. In that time 10 buildings containing 855 units have been approved; four developers are seeking permits for 218 units and city staff estimate that 13 other projects totalling 1,344 units could qualify before June when the discount range drops to 20 to 33 per cent. Grand total: 2,419 units.

Joel Giebelhaus, Watts' assistant, said that in the seven years before the discount was implemented only 294 units of housing were approved in Whalley.

Fees for Surrey are \$12.32 a square foot. In Whalley/Surrey Centre they are \$8.24.

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